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By-Goldberg, Herbert

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In agencies connected with the "War on Poverty" programs, middle class professional people are working with an indigenous staff. Special problems have arisen in the staff relations of such agencies and therapeutic group encounter experiences have not been effective in remedying the situation. The factors which appear to differentiate this particular type of group setting from the more traditional relations of the middle class include: (1) fear of failure in a well-paying high status job, (2) a different set of values and concerns, (3) a lower class orientation toward action and immediacy as opposed to the middle class verbal and introspective orientation, (4) the idea that only "crazy" people talk to psychologists, (6) lack of respect for the confidentiality of a therapeutic group encounter, (7) the problem of race, especially when the group leader is white, and (8) problems of getting all the working staff to participate. (PS)

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Dr. Herbert Goldberg
California State College at Los Angeles
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Some Problems in Therapeutic Group Encounter Experiences With Indigenous Staff

The phenomen of the indigenous non-professional assuming a professional role is a recent one, emerging and developing as a by-product of the "War On Poverty" programs. The emphasis in these programs has been on maximizing the involvement of the local community person. To accomplish this, many conventional standards for the hiring of professionals have been abandoned; criteria such as having an accredited degree or even having direct experience in the particular role. Consequently it would not be unusual to find that within a particular agency under the Head Start program, for example, there would be an individual working as a social worker though his educational background was in physical education, or a social work aide who was totally inexperienced in this kind of work and had only a high school education. Some individuals employed as teachers might be unaccredited in California and possess a degree received from a small Southern college dating back many years. The Teacher's Aide might be a neighborhood laborer who ingratiated himself by volunteering carpentry service and was subsequently hired. In general, hiring criteria are purposely kept loose to provide considerable leeway for individual agency discretion in hiring. A prime example would be a well known Head Start agency in Mississippi which hires almost no legitimate professionals; only local people. Other agencies located peripherally to a middle class community might employ a greater number of legitimate professionals because of greater availability. However, because

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of the job insecurities involved, the unusually great work demands, the frequently frustrating and autocratic administrative procedures plus the threat and uncertainties of working in a setting where traditional roles and concepts may be of little help, there is an increasing tendency for the accredited professional to shy away from these programs while a greater proportion of indigenous workers assume the vacant positions.

As a result of these employment procedures an environment and atmosphere both quantitatively and qualitatively different from that of a conventional professional agency is created. Novel interpersonal tensions and stresses arise because of the great variability among the employees in their training, education, overall background, effectiveness, and attitudes towards employment. These factors may lead to petty bickerings, overt hostilities, jealousies, displaced feelings of inadequacy, withdrawal, defensiveness, secretiveness and open rebellion. The psychologist hired as a part-time consultant in this setting and responsible for creating his own role, quickly recognizes the need for therapeutic experiences for the staff. Because of the large numbers of agency employees, the need to include as many as possible, and the time limitations the most feasible therapeutic setting is the group encounter or sensitivity experience. However, because of the unique professional format of most of these agencies, it is clear that the traditional models and expectations for these groups are not sufficient to meet the needs of this setting. Required are knowledge, skills, and procedures, which are not typically within the therapeutic armamentarium of the traditionally trained psychologist whose experience and orientation is rooted within middle class attitudes and values.

Specifically, some of the factors which differentiate this particular kind of group setting from the more traditional middle class ones are:

(1) The guiding principle for many of the staff in this setting is survival. For many this job is an economic and status boon which they have never had before. Some who had teacher's degrees from small Southern colleges and who were not able to get accreditation from the State may not have held a legitimate teaching position previously. In addition, it would not be uncommon to find a female employee who had five or more of her own children at home, frequently with no supporting father. This, plus having had the ghetto as a training school, creates for many a 'survival at all costs' attitude. The particular indigenous staff person may be working hard to learn the rules of the game and cope within them. The group encounter settings may tell him to go beyond the rules of the game by expressing hostility openly, and venting anger against authority. For many this may be a very threatening and psychologically impossible demand inasmuch as they may be still trying to integrate, cope with and hold these very feelings in place. Therefore, a setting which says "be open" may only be productive of a more self defensive, suspicious and guarded stance.

In addition, there may be a reluctance on the part of indigenous staff to express any negative feelings against a colleague in the presence of an outsider or authority figure. This act might be construed by peers as placing another's job in jeopardy and lead to reprisal for the offender. As a result most other-oriented remarks in this setting would be confined as much as possible to positive, complimentary and non-controversial remarks.

One such group that I conducted stands out vividly in my mind. I was asked by the project director of the agency to see if I could help ease the overt frictions and inter-racial conflicts between Caucasians and Blacks in this particular center. Most of the group time however was spent by the participating individuals proclaiming how wonderfully everyone cooperated with

everyone else and how well everyone got along. Any attempts to dig more deeply only received angry and defensive attitudes. The analogy may be unfortunate but the atmosphere resembled what I might expect to find in a prison -- where no matter how much trouble there is among the prisoners few will dare speak out and put himself or others in jeopardy.

(2) This leads in a sense to a second differentiating factor. The values of group encounter experiences are largely the product of middle class frustrations such as repressed sexuality and repressed hostility. However, these are not the prime concerns of the lower class, particularly the minorities such as Blacks and Mexicans. Rather, job maintenance, economic survival and materialistic security are the prime motivating factors. It is natural then to expect that the feeling tone in this kind of group will be completely different from the one found in a middle class group. The resistances will also be much stronger because one has so much more to lose when one is struggling with day to day environmental survival than when one is only struggling with conflicts due to sexual repression or unexpressed anger.

(3) Thirdly, the typical psychologist is word, abstraction and intellectually oriented in his approach to group therapeutic experiences even though he may not see himself this way and feeling involvement may be his goal. The indigenous staff person may be none of these things. This is productive of the frequently expressed opinion that we as psychologists cannot really "understand" their problems. The psychologist is likely to feel threatened by a setting which does not allow him to use his verbal armamentarin and at the same time group members may be angered and feel a lack of understanding from a psychologist who does not talk to them "where they're at".

The middle class orientation is verbal and introspective. The lower class orientation is more action and immediacy oriented. The psychologist who is attempting to get this population to talk about feelings may be asking for something which they have never done before and may not even be within their behavior repetoire. This gap in orientation may be threatening to both the psychologist and the group and lead to an interpersonal stalemate.

(4) Fourth, the indigenous staff person is holding a job which he is likely to be inadequately trained for. Therefore, he builds up defenses to make himself feel more adequate. He may be threatened by an experience with a legitimate "establishment" professional who is seen as having the potential to expose these inadequacies. In addition, the individual staff members in any particular agency might have extremely variable educational backgrounds. Some may be considerably more qualified than others and consequently the lesser qualified may be very sensitive to exposing their lack. In one Head Start agency where I worked the background of each employee was published and distributed for all to read. Strong reactions ensued because some were barely qualified, having had very little formal education. It follows that those who are lesser trained will not want to openly confront in a group setting those who are more highly qualified. This is a powerful source of anxiety and resistance unique to this kind of setting.

In my experience I found that the less formally qualified an individual was for his role the more difficult it was to get authentic feedback from him. Instead, one would get a charming, smiling response to the effect that everything was just coming along beautifully. Attempts to go deeper generally met with strong resistances.

(5) Fifth, attitudes of persons from poverty backgrounds towards psychi-

atrists and psychologists are often qualitatively different from those of the middle class. In my role as a consultant I frequently heard the comment "You ought to see so and so. He's crazy". This attitude that only "crazy" people talk to psychologists and psychiatrists tends to create a great reluctance to express personal ideas or depth feelings that are seen as making one vulnerable to this kind of evaluation. In many instances attempts to dispel this preconception was next to impossible. Many times I believe I felt like a clergyman must often feel. That is, people were nice to me because of my magical powers but I was more to be placated than to be related to.

(6) Sixth, the concept that what goes on in a therapeutic group encounter experience is confidential and the information is not to be taken outside the confines of the group is a sophisticated one and an unusually difficult one to make functional in this kind of a setting. This is particularly true in an agency where there are animosities and factionalism. I had the experience of seeing highly charged material which emerged in a group session reach the grapevine and become common knowledge within 24 hours of that session despite requests and admonitions to keep this material confidential.

One particular instance comes to mind of an agency where there was a split between staff and the administration and between staff and staff because a teacher and a social worker had been fired and because the union was attempting to organize the employees. Groups which I had recently formed for the entire staff had to be terminated for the following reasons. The project director felt that the agency was in such an interpersonally precarious balance that hostilities and suspicions made overt in group sessions would collapse the balance. Secondly, he stated that since he could not personally

be at each group to defend himself he was afraid of what might emerge in relation to respect for administration in these groups. And thirdly, anonymous phone calls were made to a couple of key administrative people in which certain attitudes and information originally revealed in a group session had been disclosed. In this kind of a situation then it becomes unfeasible to even continue formal groups much less expect real openness and directness of communication.

(7) A seventh factor which has recently assumed enormous proportions is Race. There is a dearth of trained, available minority group psychologists so that more often than not a Caucasian will assume the role. However, to the Black or Mexican population he may simply be another "Whitey", part of the oppressive establishment structure that does not understand them and whose goals oppose their own. Consequently, the psychologist may become the focus of intense transference reactions ranging from passive-aggression such as not showing up at meetings or arriving a half hour late to overt hostility and attempts to engage him in angry discussions. This problem can become even more intense if the psychologist is both Caucasian and Jewish a not unlikely combination, or if the administration is Caucasian in which case the psychologist may be viewed as being in concert with the agency administration. Another serious problem is whether or not the psychologist himself has the capacity and stability to encounter and deal with these hostilities when they are being directed at him. The emotional security and adequacy of the psychologist in this setting is an issue which is more critical than it might be in any other setting. An example of the sort of problem which may arise occurred in one agency setting in which I worked where there was a militant Black person working as a teacher. He openly refused to cooperate in allowing a Caucasian social worker or psychologist to observe his children. He felt strongly that

they could not be of any help and was agressively vocal in stating this. Under pressure from administration one psychologist was allowed to visit the class but received almost no cooperation from this teacher. When a young boy from his class was about to be transferred to another class because it was felt that the boy needed a warm mothering figure as a teacher and a less authoritarian setting this teacher undermined the transfer by convincing the child's mother to remove the child from the program altogether. The depth of this kind of antagonism towards Caucasians with its paranoid overtones can by very disturbing and disruptive when encountered in the group encounter setting.

(8) Eighth, to make the group encounter experience a meaningful one requires the participation of all working staff. However, to achieve this necessitates making the group a mandatory part of the schedule. The resentment at "having to go" may absorb much therapy time. And yet to make the session voluntary may result in the absence of many "key" people. A group that only meets once a week can be easily undermined with passive-aggressive techniques of lateness and sporadic absences.

These eight factors were pointed up to highlight the special problems of therapeutic group encounter experiences with indigenous staff. It is clear that in this setting it is not simply a matter of extending the principles of traditional group experiences. There is an important need in terms of the education and training of psychologists to learn to cope with these factors if we are to be effective in this setting. There is a need to delineate more clearly and precisely the special limits of this kind of setting and to create workable original formats. In addition, there is a great need for individual psychologists to know themselves better in terms of their own fears and

distortions regarding poverty and minority group populations and to recognize their own defenses against experiencing their feelings towards poverty and minority populations and encountering rejection and overt hostility from such a group.

On the other hand, there are some latent positive factors present in this population which can be used toward making this kind of group encounter successful. Among them is the basic underlying wish of most staff members on some level of consciousness to identify with and achieve the status, authority, intellectual development and fluency of the middle class professional. The psychologist in this setting is combatting decades of suspiciousness and rage against the establishment, particularly the Caucasian. However, if the psychologist can recognize the basic underlying wish of the individual members of this population to become effective, accepted people and can work with this latent upward drive he can achieve success in this setting. The most difficult task will be the development of an atmosphere of trust and individual worthiness which will allow individuals to recognize their real aspirations.

In conclusion, the problems of group encounter experiences with indigenous staff highlights the "intimacy gap" which is part of the special problem of Poverty - Middle Class and Minority Group - Caucasian group relations. The group encounter is a microcosm of the society-wide tensions which exist between these levels. It also highlights the kinds of problems which can ensue when the established, predictive and protective limits of social functioning are varied. Furthermore, it highlights the vast areas of ignorance and need which exist in our attempts at therapeutic group encounter with poverty and minority populations.